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Enclosing the English Commons: Property, Productivity and the Making of Modern Capitalism

Legend has it that Alfred the Great awarded Oxford's Port Meadow to the freemen of the city as a token of thanks for participating in the defence against Danish invaders. Historians dispute the account – but regardless, the Domesday Book indicates that the Oxford freemen have managed the meadow and used it as free pasture since the Saxon era. It still bears the evidence of thousands of years of community use, from Bronze Age burial mounds right up to regular horse racing in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Port Meadow is one of Oxford's few remaining "commons" – a parcel of land upon which local inhabitants retain their ancient common land rights. These include drawing water and fuel, rights of passage, fishing the River Thames and grazing animals. To this day, mingling amongst students and ramblers, horses and cattle roam freely. For millennia, most of England's arable land fell under the category of "commons"; it was only a gradual process that created our modern arrangement of exclusive, unitary land ownership. This process was called enclosure.

In a nutshell, enclosure was the legal mechanism which expropriated the commons (also known as common lands or waste lands) from England's commoners, aggregated them and put them to new use. It revolutionised private property as a concept, largely introduced the concept of land as a commodity, and came to define the economic priorities of the last five hundred years. It catalysed the Industrial Revolution and English urbanisation. In terms of economic development, it was somewhat akin to the invention of the wheel, if rather more contentious.

Before enclosure, common land was the most common form in England: land on which anybody could grow food, graze cattle, sleep, eat and revel. After enclosure, more than half of the land in England fell under the control of single owners, who were free to do as they pleased with it. Other inhabitants had no other rights over it, besides in some (often interrupted) cases a right of way to move across it. There were two main ways in which enclosure was achieved. The first was informal enclosure, which occurred between 1450 and 1650 through a series of personal agreements within a village to consolidate plots of land. The second was formal enclosure by parliamentary act, not used until the 18th century. Parliament's intervention was behind the majority of British land enclosed.

Enclosure does not strictly refer to the fencing off of territory, though it did almost always involve (and in many cases require) the introduction of a physical barrier, whether fence or hedge. Legally, what enclosure meant was that the rights over the land had changed. Commoners could not graze, draw water, or chop wood; landowners could consolidate, dictate, and develop.

The effects of enclosure were immensely far-reaching. It underpinned modernity, catalysing urbanisation, the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions, and the modern understanding of property. It also rippled outwards across the world: Britain was the earliest industrialising nation and the first great colonial power. The British Empire replicated its rural land-use policies across Asia, Africa, and the Americas, codifying new property rights worldwide. Some historians laud it as one of history's greatest steps towards economic efficiency and liberal freedom; others lament it as one of history's most egregious and destructive instances of class-based injustice.

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To live with common people

There is really no single definition of the English commons; and in trying to construct one, historians collide with a number of problems endemic to medieval study. Much of contemporary law in the British Isles was based on custom or agreement, the application of which could vary enormously with small variations in either region or era. The economics of each county could vary dramatically. Regulation could depend on the behaviour of the local church, the whims of the manorial lord, or the idiosyncrasies of the local manorial court. Furthermore, records are inconsistent; much of enclosure consisted of informal understandings, and many of the details are long lost. The chronology of the process is a similarly thorny topic – so much so that it has become a historical subfield in its own right.[1] Nonetheless, there are established broad strokes.

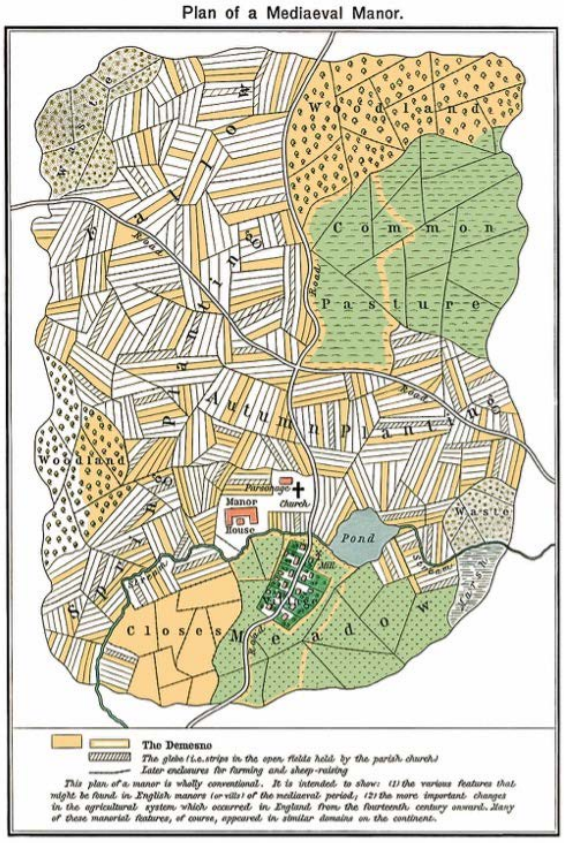

Figure 1: a theoretical medieval manor, with strip farming and commons marked

Even prior to enclosure, almost all land within a manor was under the control of a manor lord, though the idea that this was truly 'owned' in the way that we understand it would have been alien to both the lord and the commoners. Though the lord retained the title, the commoners retained their rights over it. There were exceptions – church land, for example, and the occasional freeholder who owned a small plot (a group that would slowly grow in number).

On the commons, the majority of farming was done on an open-field system – upon which tenants farmed for subsistence and paid rent for the right to do so, either in goods, labour or (quite rarely) money. A few tenants were freeholders, or yeomen, owning their own land for subsistence farming; but the vast majority paid rent to a lord in exchange for the opportunity to farm the land. Land was typically farmed in a strip, in large part because the common plough at the time was a chore to turn.

Ancient privileges and customs permitted dispossessed tenants – those without access to an open-field plot – to use the "waste" or "common" land, under the condition that they had sufficient resources to raise a calf. This entitled peasants to various rights – particularly the grazing of animals, the strip farming of crops and the gathering of water and fuel (either wood or peat, either one of which was a crucial right: fuel was one of the largest expenses of a medieval peasant).

Commoners formed manorial courts, by which they governed land use by consensus. All decisions had to be reached communally. The system forced users of the common land (whom 20th-century Marxists later termed "commonists") to reach a consensus; for example, over irrigation decisions, or when to open meadows to livestock for grazing at a time that would be most effective for fertilisation. The communal grazing seasons bound each farmer to the schedule of the others; all harvests needed to be made roughly simultaneously, to optimise the grazing of livestock.

Landowners encountered two problems under this system. The first was a tendency towards idleness. Without much use for currency, peasants tended to grow what they needed to survive, and then busied themselves primarily with a dizzying calendar of saint's days, solstices, and pagan cultural festivals. In short, they engaged themselves largely with ritual and revelry. Historians estimate that they worked about half the days of the year (though those days of work were not light labour).[2] The pre-eminence of the festival calendar discouraged excess production – a circumstance which did not lend itself to economic growth.

This fed into the second concern with the common land system: efficiency. The division of land into small strips was uneconomical. It prevented consolidation, which in turn prevented any economy of scale. The shared nature of the space, and the need to synchronise grazing, also discouraged certain crop use; for example, peasants were disinclined to grow turnips, clover, or any crop that didn't align with the harvest

schedule of their neighbours – otherwise, the grazing livestock of another common-land user would make short work of them. Innovation was naturally stifled: large groups are typically slower to adopt and trial new techniques than individual actors. The common-land system also delayed the production of textiles, by preventing the full-time grazing of sheep for wool. Consensus decision-making tended to be slow, both in implementation and responsiveness to developments in agricultural science. All this, taken together, reduced the possibility of entrepreneurship.

Often, one needed to own land locally to exercise common rights. However, this was not always how the law was applied. Squatters could acquire their own rights through continued use; and the landless could often make use of common land, provided they had enough resources to raise a calf. Considering that the majority of resources needed could be then acquired on the common itself, this was an attainable entry requirement; this cow could graze upon the common for much of the year, and the farmer could trade its milk. Access to the commons for the landless varied widely from county to county and century to century. Sometimes access was total; sometimes local custom curtailed it effectively to nothing.[3]

Some common land still exists. Allotments are a modern permutation, though they are not formally common lands. Oxfordshire has its own remaining common lands: besides Port Meadow, it also boasts the Nettlebed Commons, upon which all local residents have the right to graze livestock or gather fuel – though strip farming is prohibited. Commons farming, however, is still in use in the Laxton parish of Nottinghamshire, where tenants strip-farm open fields and report to the jury of the manorial court.

The tragedy of the commons

Arguments against the common land system are often based around the concept of "the tragedy of the commons", a phrase that ecologist Garret Hardin coined in his 1968 article of the same name. The theory states, in essence, that humans are self-interested actors, and that when presented with a communal resource, they will tend to take more of it. The selfish actor reaps the benefits of over-consumption, and the community shares equally in the negative externalities – meaning a smaller sum cost for the actor in question.

Hardin argued that "the rational herdsman concludes that the only sensible course for him to pursue is to add another animal to his herd. And another; and another… But this is the conclusion reached by each and every rational herdsman sharing a commons."[4] As he saw it, "Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit — in a world that is limited. Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all."

In Hardin's view, there was no recourse except to instigate a system that prioritised private property in order to guarantee responsibility. He recognised that there were problems inherent in the institution of private property coupled with legal inheritance, but felt that "the alternative of the commons is too horrifying to contemplate. Injustice is preferable to total ruin."

The English establishment concurred. Others, however, have contested the argument. Anthropologist Arthur McEvoy argued that Hardin had fundamentally misunderstood the management of the commons, saying that it did not rely on a system of anarchy but one of consensus. "The farmers on Hardin's pasture do not seem to talk to one another," he wrote; "As individuals, they are alienated, rational, utility-maximizing automatons and little else."[5] In fact, peasants met at least twice a year at the manorial court, and presumably addressed grievances when in the field together – as must have occurred very often.

Hardin eventually retracted his thesis, stating that he should have called it "the tragedy of the unmanaged commons".[6] There are various other controversies associated with his seminal work, centering around Hardin's racism. One section is headed, in bold, "The freedom to breed is intolerable". Hardin himself argued against food aid to poorer nations, believing that their growing populations were an environmental threat. A 2019 article in *Scientific American* calls for readers to "stop the mindless invocation of Hardin"; yet his ideas persist and are applied not just to the first great waves of enclosure, but to its post-industrial ramifications on the world's threatened ecosystems.[7]

"Sheep devoure men"

Enclosure began in the 13th century, but barely. The Statute of Merton of 1235 (understandably now known as the Ancient Statute of Merton) created the first legal basis for enclosure; amongst various other

provisions, it allowed for the lord of a manor to enclose land, provided that sufficient commons still existed for his tenants. It soon fell out of use; little was heard about enclosure for two centuries.

Still, this quiet period wasn't necessarily a time out. Instead, between 1235 and 1450 the ground was laid for enclosure – a series of socio-economic shifts created a context in which enclosure was morally and financially feasible.

The arrival of the Black Death in 1348 undoubtedly served as an accelerant. Estimates vary, but England lost between 25 and 60 percent of its population in around 500 days, the vast majority of whom were serfs. It may have been little consolation, but those who were left could leverage far higher prices for their labour. Landowners interpreted the rise in wages as idleness or insubordination; historians argue that they lacked an economic framework by which to analyse the wage change, and they instead defaulted to a moral perspective.[8]

Figure 2: "The Dance of Death", inspired by the Black Death, was a common artistic motif in the late medieval period

For a year, wages were the centre of an agricultural conflict. In 1349, siding with the landowners, King Edward III passed the Ordinance of Labourers and fixed wages at a pre-pandemic level. Authorities enforced the law both ruthlessly and effectively, creating decades of resentment that culminated in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. The revolt failed, but the damage was done: serfdom rapidly disappeared.

According to some historians, the subsequent rise in labour prices, matched with a drop in the price of grain, created economic pressure for the gentry. Landowners were suddenly motivated to increase their revenue, but the agricultural system was not well-disposed towards innovation.

The drop in grain price aligned with a rise in the price of wool; which also aligned with a period of new social mobility for peasants, more of whom had become freeholders as a result of the economic changes. Freeholders were more likely to engage in private agreements that supported enclosure: to raise sheep for wool, an entrepreneur needed enclosed land to ensure their herd would not graze the crops of their neighbour. This applied whether the shepherd was a lord or a freeholder.

A new liberal consensus slowly supplanted the consensus of the commons. Ever-greater numbers of land workers became landowners, with a new vested interest in the exclusive rights of property – and the opportunity to accrue more. In these communities, enclosure itself was usually agreed by consensus.

These two factors – wool and the growing possibility of private enterprise – catalysed the first significant expansion of enclosure, occurring between 1450 and 1640. Wool had become an ever-more tempting revenue stream, but because it required the full-time pasture of sheep, it was incompatible with the commons system. What it offered, however, was the possibility of surplus far beyond subsistence agriculture. Where previously excess production must be eaten or go to waste, wool could be stockpiled in surplus. It also benefited more dramatically from economy of scale.

Some historians question the role of price shifts; economic historian Harriet Bradley claims that commons farming, in accordance with the tragedy model, had caused a significant degradation of soil quality. She suggests that agriculture transitioned simply because the existing model had proved unsustainably poorly organised, and that the consolidation of land was a reasonable response.[9] Economic historian Deirdre McCloskey, however, has argued that the decentralisation of strip farming was an effective risk-reduction strategy.[10]

Regardless, informal enclosure movements began around 1450, largely through chaotic and atomised processes of private agreements, questionable evictions, and occasionally outright intimidation. One route was known as "unity of possession". In this, if an individual succeeded in acquiring the whole of the land, then common law would cease to operate as there was nobody with the right to operate it (which depended

on the regulations of the local manorial court). It sometimes led to coercion: in Stuntney, near Cambridge, the landlord's gradual acquisition of the land made farming prohibitively difficult. Landowners created impossible circumstances that forced peasants to comply.[11]

It was illegal for the manorial lord to enclose the commons directly. He might encroach upon it, but he had to leave sufficient space for his tenants to exercise their common rights. The legality was often purely academic; it happened anyway.[12]

Another method was piecemeal enclosure. This legally muddy process involved strip farmers individually withdrawing their strips from an open field and enclosing them, reducing the quantity of commons remaining. In doing so, peasants set out alone to seek the opportunity of private enterprise. However, they also deprived their neighbours of the structure of the previously existing arrangement, interrupting their farming.

The basis of this was a contemporary legal debate about the nature of the commons. There were essentially two views. The first held that the commons were inherently common and should be enforced as such. The second held that the commons were a temporary state of voluntary agreement between each party, with the consent of (and for the mutual benefit of) all parties. Under the latter view, piecemeal enclosure was legal. Under the former, it was illegal. No satisfactory legal conclusion was ever reached; the fences stood.

These informal measures redistributed England's land from peasants up towards smallholders and the nobility, though historians have struggled to quantify the shift during the period; by nature, informal agreements took shape outside official records. Regardless, hedgerows and fences began to appear where there had been none before; the numbers of farmers in the fields dwindled, replaced by sheep.

The sheep fields were not without their detractors. Responding to the flocks that suddenly dotted the English countryside, Thomas More wrote in his 1516 book *Utopia* that "Your shepe that were wont to be so meke and tame, and so smal eaters, now, as I heare saye, be become so great devowerers and so wylde, that they eate up and swallow down the very men them selfes. They consume, destroye, and devoure whole fields, howses and cities."[13] The meaning, if it is not evident, is that sheep were occupying the once-common land of people.

Formal enclosure

The field was marked in 1235; sown in 1450; and finally, in 1760, harvest began. The scene was set for the second wave of enclosure, known as "formal" or "parliamentary" enclosure. According to the calculations of medieval historian Edwin Gay, only 3% of England's arable land had been enclosed before parliament intervened. A century later, more than half of the country's useful farming land belonged to private owners, with the ancient rights of the commons stripped.[14] Gay's statistic, however, could be skewed: many informal agreements from centuries earlier were ratified by acts of parliament in the 18th century. In previous centuries, enclosure had been a highly individual process. Hyper-local economic and social concerns, differing from village to village, governed its progress. In the 18th century, however, these individual motivations coalesced into a bona fide policy agenda.

The profitability of colonialism led to a new economic plan. England's need for textiles had become less pressing as its colonial reach extended. It sourced its wool from Scotland, and its cotton from India and the south-eastern United States. The next logical step, policy-makers felt, was to enclose as much of England's arable land as possible in order to maximise productivity. If enclosure could improve productivity, then a labour surplus would be freed from the toil of farming, made newly available for England's growing urban industrial areas.

In 1793, the newly-formed Board of Agriculture published around ninety volumes of policy recommendations for England's land; they were "almost monotonous in their reiteration of the point that agricultural improvement has come through enclosure, and more enclosure must take place".[15] Industrialisation was not an unforeseen consequence of enclosure; it was an act of economic planning.

Around 4,000 acts of parliament enclosed 7 million hectares of land between 1760 and 1870, amounting to one sixth of England's total area.[16] Formal agreements were simpler and more legally secure than their informal predecessors, and could also involve a higher degree of coercion. Where informal enclosure had (technically) demanded consensus, formal acts were content with a simple majority vote – initially four-fifths of stakeholders, but soon reduced to three-quarters. In practice, committees often accepted much less.[17]

A committee, drawn from the same class as the largest enclosers, assessed applications. Meanwhile, the measuring, valuing and dividing of land was assigned to independent outsiders. Their actual independence was questionable.[18] Corruption was endemic. There was a significant conflict of interest at play.

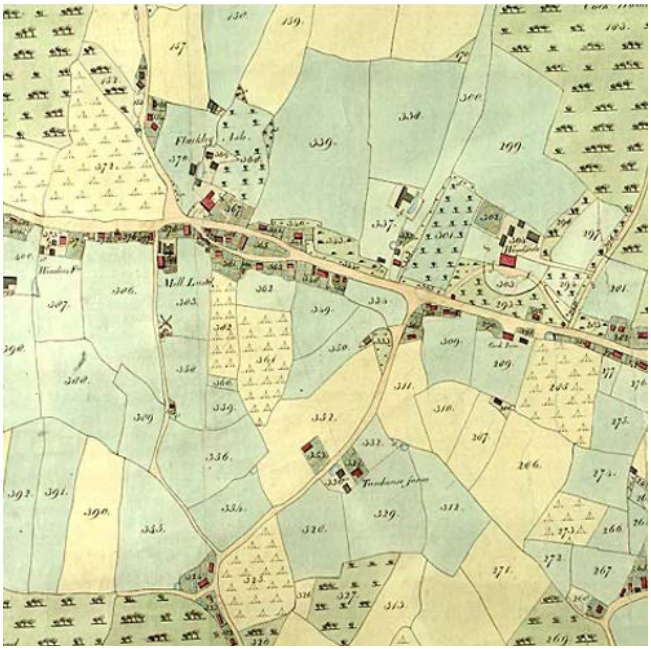
Figure 3: Sussex tithe map, dated 1846, showing enclosed plots and landowners (National Archives)

In the Somerset farming area of Kings' Sedgemoor, for example, Viscount "Bully" Bolingbroke strove to enclose the commons in order to pay off his enormous gambling debts. The committee chairman overseeing the request appeared to be a friend of his, using his nickname: "Bully," he wrote, "has a scheme of enclosure which, if it succeeds, I am told will free him of all his difficulties." The Oxfordshire town of Abingdon, meanwhile, enclosed its commons in the face of public opposition that surely amounted to more than one quarter of all stakeholders.[19] Members of Parliament needed, at the time, to be landowners – obviously the demographic that would benefit the most. In fact, the gentry occupied every legal position from Justice of the Peace upwards.

The landless lost out immediately. Unlike small freeholders, they received no compensation and lost the commons that had provided their sole means of income. Little documentation survives to confirm it, but it is likely that they were part of the concurrent boom in urban population. Small freeholders were entitled to some compensation, in land or in currency; however, the land afforded was often almost unusably small, and the law stipulated that certain costly tasks – physical enclosure and survey – must be performed. The cost analysis was often not worth it, and smallholders frequently sold their allocated land to the large, local, now-consolidating landowner.[20]

All told, enclosure was far kinder to those who owned the land than those who worked it; agricultural prices suddenly climbed 77% between 1798 and 1801, while labourers' wages stagnated.[21] However, as hard as it may have been on the nation's peasantry, enclosure undeniably drove new innovations in agriculture – to the point that historians dubbed the period between the mid-17th and late-18th centuries the Agricultural Revolution.

The separation of plots allowed for new crops to be cultivated (such as turnips and clover) that would otherwise have been eaten by grazing cattle. It was also the beginning of the Norfolk four-course system, a method of rotation on a four-year cycle that went from wheat to turnips, to barley, to clover. The clover was grazed by livestock in the fourth year, and the turnips were used for animal feed in the second; this increased availability of animal manure for fertiliser. One of its main benefits was the new absence of the "fallow" year, when nothing was grown to allow for soil recovery. Instead, the field was productive four years out of four.

The boom in agriculture also catalysed a desire to bring more land into productive use. One aspect of this was the widespread draining of peatlands and bogs. While this created agricultural potential, it also increased pressure on rural peasants who had long relied on peat as a source of fuel during the winter – fuel was one of the single largest expenses for most medieval peasants.[22] It also had an unforeseen consequence that has only recently become problematic: peat is an incredible carbon sink, more effective per hectare than any forest.

As the name Agricultural Revolution implies, agrarian production surged, rising 250% between 1700 and 1850. Much of this was due to bringing new land into arable conditions, but even pre-existing land productivity rose by 13% per hectare.[23] A team of economists offered a particularly British means of judging agricultural output: the percentage of barley brewed for beer per annum. They noted that, in years with better food security, peasants brewed more barley; in times of scarcity, they resorted to eating it. During the 17th century, around 65% of barley was brewed; however, by the 1860s the percentage reached 100%.[24]

The spoils were not evenly divided. As agricultural production increased, so did malnutrition. The same economists came to this conclusion by studying the average height of new military recruits. The average height declined by between 2.9 and 6.5 centimetres between 1760 and 1850, suggesting that recruits in the industrial age were not as well-nourished as in their agrarian days.[25] The Agricultural Revolution was not an equal one.

From the country to the town

Enclosure drove urbanisation and industrialisation – and the process was reciprocal. Landowners required fewer labourers to work the fields, as strips were consolidated and methods became more sophisticated; this led dispossessed farmers to move towards urban centres, in search of other employment. Simultaneously, food supply became more readily available in cities, due to the new efficiency of agriculture. Then industrialisation in the cities drove technological progress, creating innovations that made agriculture even more efficient. More labourers moved to the cities, seeking new employment. The cycle continued; the first Industrial Revolution began.

Figure 4: "Manchester from Kersal Moor", landscape by William Wyld, 1852. Note the smoke stacks over the city.

England's demographic changes were enormous. From 1750 to 1850, England's population more than doubled.[26] Urban populations exploded; meanwhile, rural populations declined. For city-dwellers, subsistence farming was impossible; they were compelled into industrial work, where their working days almost doubled. The demographic links between enclosure and urbanisation found physical manifestation in the enclosure roads: the newly rigid property lines created many of the straight rural roads in Britain. These facilitated physical transport between rural manor and urban centre.

Many economists point to the Industrial Revolution – and its origins in enclosure – as the first point when the British population escaped the "Malthusian trap": this refers to the idea that food supply fundamentally limits population growth, and that any growth in population would be reflected in the ever-smaller shares of harvest that members of the community received. This constriction effectively regulated population size. The Black Death, with its great population drop, was a temporary reprieve from Malthus' theory; but enclosure, with its dramatic increase in food supply, created a sustainable labour surplus for the first time. This allowed the population to expand beyond the limitations imposed by subsistence farming – and expand it did.

Growth begat growth. A growing wage-labour population created a growing market for consumer goods. A growing demand for consumer goods created a greater drive for expansion; a greater drive for expansion led to ever-more sophisticated techniques for resource extraction, and England's unusually high access to metal ores proved an advantage. This process reached backwards, too: as more labourers left the land, those who remained needed to produce more food to feed the cities. More land was reclaimed and enclosed. This created more private property, and often more smallholders. Though there were plenty of larger single owners, between the small fields of the country and the small factories of the town, entrepreneurship and innovation increased. Meanwhile, the introduction of division of labour increased productivity and specialisation. This is visible in Britain's changing consumption. Between 1670 and 1840, the amount of sugar and spirits consumed increased by ten times; tea and coffee consumption increased by four times.[27]

What occurred was a vast increase in four factors, known as the 'factors of production': natural resources, labour, capital, and enterprise. Taken together, it becomes evident why a change in land-use policy is identified (by both critics and supporters) as the beginning of capitalism.

Productivity had a steep human cost. Friedrich Engels, co-author of *The Communist Manifesto,* lived in Manchester between 1842 and 1844, where he worked in the offices of his family's textile factory. His father hoped that the work might compel Engels to reconsider some of his more radical political opinions. Instead, Engels wrote a series of damning articles about the suffering of factory workers, culminating in his book *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, in which he described the poor living conditions of the English worker – disease, overcrowding, economic abuse, and poor wages. He painted a bleak picture: "suicide," he wrote, "formerly the enviable privilege of the upper classes, has become fashionable among the English workers, and numbers of the poor kill themselves to avoid the misery from which they see no other means of escape".[28]

Engels' book made quite an impression on a young Karl Marx, who had published some of Engels' articles abroad; together, the pair found themselves searching for the historical origin of capitalism and the creation of the proletariat. They believed that they found it in enclosure, the material transition from feudalism to capitalism. Marx wrote in the first volume of *Capital* that the history of enclosure – the "expropriation" – "is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire".[29] (Nonetheless, the Engels' family factory continued to fund the revolutionaries' writing.)

This is not purely a Marxist view. Nobel Prize-winning economist Douglass North refers to the Industrial Revolution in his theory of institutions. In his view, institutions have ushered history along; institutions in this context are not to be confused with organisations, which he conceptualises as "players". Instead, institutions are the rules of the game itself. For example, well-considered institutions reduce transaction costs – such as the extreme transaction difficulty in exchanging private lands before the arrival of parliamentary enclosure. Good institutions also offset market failures and ease progress towards classical liberal economic ideals – particularly decentralised decision-making, an obvious opposite to the commons. North considered the emergence of property rights – a factor of enclosure – to be the driving institutional force behind the Industrial Revolution, a part of a process he called adaptive efficiency.[30]

It certainly brought a great deal of initial hardship, but observers may not wish to disregard the conveniences that industrialisation brought. Pro-commons observers often romanticise the commoner life, which was as marked by malnutrition, disease, illiteracy and hardship as it was by consensus decision-making and agrarian festivities. Some historians also cast doubt upon some of the more salacious accounts of urban hardship, suggesting that "it was at times of depression that public interest in such matters was aroused, and that there was a tendency … to assume that the blackest features of the slump were characteristic of the economy in normal times".[31]

Engels wrote at length about the very real suffering of the factory workers, but neglected the suffering of their rural equivalents; as one historian wrote, "if consumption and fevers afflicted the urban worker, rheumatism and ague were a scourge to the village labourer".[32] When labour was freed from subsistence farming, it created opportunities for innovation and a reprieve from the cycles of feast and famine that had blighted life on the commons.

A common historiographical perspective situates enclosure as a necessary evil. Economic historian Deirdre McCloskey shares this view: she complained in 1975 that the existing literature "emphasises the effects on equity to the neglect of the effects on efficiency".[33] McCloskey, and her market-minded colleagues, perceived enclosure as an unfortunate chapter in an ultimately triumphant story of development, which would usher in revolutions in education, medicine and culture.

From the country to the colonies

Enclosure was both driven by and a driver of colonial expansion. Historians have noted that there has been an "intriguing, if rough, coincidence of peak periods of enclosure in England – the Tudor period and the late eighteenth century – with times of imperial expansion and reinvigoration".[34] The availability of new textiles and goods from Britain's colonies helped to catalyse the move away from subsistence agriculture – which itself supported an increasingly colonial economy, as production began to shift towards goods that could be traded overseas. The physical processes of imperialism

also received a boost. Britain's shipbuilding relied on a newly liquid, non-agricultural labour force, who worked with timber from enclosed forests; and as is well-known, the navy became both the envy and the terror of the contemporary world.

Enclosure soon went global, carried forth like a gospel by entrepreneurial missionaries. In India in 1793, the English East India Company instituted the Permanent Settlement of Bengal – a process of enclosure across the Bengali countryside that replaced the local commons with a landlord-based system intended to increase productivity. While it did technically prove more economically dynamic, the drift away from subsistence crops towards inedible cash crops led to famines.

Meanwhile, in North America, settlers applied the process of enclosure to Native Americans. In 1689, influential English political philosopher John Locke explicitly justified the conquest of the Americas using the terminology of enclosure, referring to the indigenous population as "commoners". He asked his readers "whether in the wild woods and uncultivated waste of America, left to nature, without any improvement, tillage, or husbandry, a thousand acres yield the needy and wretched inhabitants as many conveniences of life as ten acres of equally fertile land do in Devonshire, where they are well cultivated".[35] Through its empire, the British belief in enclosure defined the land-use practices of half the arable world.

Meanwhile, closer to home, some of the debates about enclosure continue. The Oxford Freemen have managed Port Meadow since 1551; and the Freemen still frequently clash with both the city council and the university when they feel their common rights are threatened. The society is alive and well; in fact, it is continuing to evolve. In 2008, the city council granted women the right to join the Freemen for the first time, securing their own ancestral rights over the meadow. There are still rules for admission: one route is to be the apprentice of a serving freeman for two years. Oxford resident Hannah Crowther earned her acceptance by working as an apprentice at the BMW plant in Cowley.[36]

Figure 5: The construction of Oxford University's Castle Mill graduate accommodation by Port Meadow

Between 2010 and 2013, the Oxford Freemen resisted the building of a new Oxford University graduate student accommodation block named Castle Mill, situated at the southern end of Port Meadow. While the development technically lies out of common bounds, it has affected the line of sight from the commons; campaigners argued that it destroyed an ancient site of natural beauty, the ancestral rights of which belong to the people of Oxford. The two sides eventually reached a compromise: developers were to incorporate new cladding and a screen of trees to reduce the unsightly visual impact.[37]

In a world partitioned by enclosure, Port Meadow manages to survive; a parliamentary act of curtailment is now unlikely. The meadow continues to sustain both livestock and local ramblers, despite the disturbance from the University accommodation blocks that mar its once sacrosanct view.

They hang the man and flog the woman
That steals the goose from off the common,
But let the greater villain loose
That steals the common from the goose.
–Folk poem; author unknown.

Endnotes

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